

# Vera Amar

VERA AMAR

Belgrade

Serbia

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## Growing up

My name is Vera Vajda; my married name is Amar. My father was Nikola Mikloša Vajda and my mother Miroslava, nee Torbić. I was born on June 22, 1923. I am the eldest of three children. My mother gave birth to my two brothers and I in the course of three years. My youngest brother, Vojislav, and I were both born in June and my middle brother, Ljubomir, was born in January.

The thing I remember about my mother's side of the family is that they were very poor. She lost her parents during World War I; they were spoken of very infrequently at home. My father's parents lived outside of Yugoslavia. They came two or three times for short visits to Yugoslavia; I did not know them well. My father was born in *Zalaegerszeg*, Hungary. When he graduated from secondary school, he went to Vienna to study. He completed what they called at the time a commercial two-year college. My paternal grandfather, Emil, was a court furrier. My paternal grandmother was named Judita. There were four children in the family: my father was the eldest; then Martin; a sister, Tereza; and the youngest, Lajos. They were religious and they celebrated all the holidays. I do not make a distinction about how religious they were, if they were among Jews in name alone or they lived like Jews. I was too little to have made such a distinction; today I know this well.

I remember when we went to the wedding of my father's younger sister, Tereza, in Budapest. Although I was very young, I remember that wedding. It was in a synagogue, but I do not remember where the synagogue was. My mother sewed velvet suits with white shirts for my brothers. I had a red pleated dress with a lace collar and patent leather shoes. They were my first and most beautiful patent leather shoes. My mother had a dress that was pleated in a bell shape, in three rows, and patent leather shoes. Father wore a dress suit. I do not remember how we traveled there or how we returned. I only remember Aunt Tereza's wedding, my patent leather shoes, my dress and my mother's.

## During the war

I was 17 when the war began. At the time, the question of family and their relationships were distant to me. Now, I think about this much more and only lately have I received additional information. My father's family lived and were killed in Hungary, in Budapest. There is a museum named after my youngest uncle, Lajos Vajda Museum. I was very surprised to learn about this place, but I never managed to enter and see what was inside, especially if there are pictures.

Fifteen years ago, I went on a business trip to *Szentendre* with David Dinko, a member of the Academy of Science and worked with frescoes. We worked on a series called "The Beginning of Literacy" and filmed the origins of literacy using old icons. Szentendre is a small town with nine churches and yet not one priest was still there, except the one who gave us the key. I wanted to see where my grandmother was buried. We were in Szentendre for eight days and only later did I learn about Lajos Vajda's museum. They took me to the Jewish cemetery on my last day there. The entire cemetery was dug up and the black marble monuments were laying one on top of the other. The names could not be read. It bothered me that it was like this, and that is a part of my subconscious that pulls me.

My father's mother Judita died right before the war, and my father was killed in 1941 in Belgrade along with his brother Martin. His sister remained in Budapest, she married and I know her married name is Klein and that she had three children. The whole family died in the war. My Uncle Lajos, the youngest, was in a camp. At that time, my grandfather was captured and I do not know whether he died in a camp or outside. Uncle Lajos was released from the camp, contracted tuberculosis and died. I have no idea where he is buried.

What connects me very closely to my family, to my father and his family, is what my father formed within his family here in Belgrade; he brought tranquility and material prosperity. He was well-educated and made a good living. He was very tender with us children. Father worked a lot. He spent the mornings and the afternoons at work at "Tuner and Vagner," a private company. He would come home to eat lunch, then return to work. That is what life was like in Belgrade before the war.

My father was a manager, a financial specialist, and he had a big salary. He first worked for "Bajloni," then at "Tuner and Vagner" and finally for "Brace Zdravkovic," a quarry. It is because of this last job that we moved to Pasino Hill. The office was at 7 Nebojsa Street. My father and mother met before my father began working in "Tuner and Vagner," while he was still working in "Bajloni," a Belgrade brewery. He was a boss, of what today is called the commercial department, where my mother worked as a clerk. There was great love and happiness between them. My father, although he came from a foreign country, found tranquility here, and my mother was very happy, because she had a wonderful life with my father. In three years, she gave birth to three children. Unfortunately, it all came to an end in 1941 and that began the tragedy that affected all Jewish families in Belgrade. As a child, I watched a whole column of Jews from different cities, Skopje and especially from Macedonia. At the time I did not think about it much.

My father and mother lived in a room, near London (a neighborhood in the center of Belgrade) in a building where the Bata store is today. I was born there. Later they moved temporarily into a building owned by Bajloni. We also lived on Solunska Street in a Jewish house where the Pardo family lived. The Pardos had two sons and a daughter but unfortunately they were all killed. We also lived at 3 Jovanov Street where the Kalef family lived. And finally we lived at 30 Cara Urosa in a building that no longer exists. Above us was the synagogue that unfortunately was destroyed by the Germans when they retreated. As a child, I always went to synagogue. I liked it, it was attractive and meaningful to me. Since I am from a mixed marriage, I had a dilemma about whether to take Serbian or Jewish religious classes. To this day, this is still a relevant question. My mother and father were very sensitive, and this meant that my father did not offend my mother nor

my mother, my father. I went through school without taking any religious studies. However, the synagogue attracted me – it was full of weddings, I went there and everything was lovely. Later, I saw that I was in a picture taken at a wedding of a relative of my husband, Isak Bata Amar.

In the Dorcol neighborhood, where I spent my youth, 90 percent of the population was Jewish. I went to the German-Serbian school with my brothers. Our housekeeper took us to school. We spent most of the day on Jovanova Street. Since I had two brothers, I grew up on roller-skates, scooters and bicycles. In Kalemegdan, where the zoo is today (it did not exist at the time), there were swings, merry-go-rounds with ropes attached. At the end of the rope there was rubber, where one was supposed to sit; we drove it with our feet until we were flying.

The entire atmosphere was Jewish – when I think about it, I did not know one Serbian family that lived in the house where I lived or in the houses next to mine or across the street. They were all Jews. My husband's aunt's sister lived across the street. Even as a young man, my father would come to visit his relative who had three children. I think their last name was Demajo, but I know the children's first names were: Marsel, Miksa and Mikica. They were my friends. Eighty percent of the children in my grade were Jewish. The people who lived around us were Jews, and this was entirely normal for us. The relations between the Serbs and the Jews were very close. The holidays were celebrated; everyone visited one another. My mother did not want to celebrate any holidays, because she did not want to offend my father. Everything concerning these holidays that I soaked up, experienced and that became an integral part of my life, I experienced outside of my house. I had a happy childhood with great comforts. When I look back on all this, it seems that all of us Jews lived like one big family in Dorcol.

I do not remember if there was a Jewish school in Belgrade, I think that there was not. Maybe there was a Jewish kindergarten, but since my mother stopped working as soon as she married, she was able to take care of the house and children. I went to the women's gymnasium; that building still exists on Dusanova Street.

Going to synagogue was very exciting and nice for me. I went to look at the brides and to see how they looked, to listen and to attend the weddings because it made me happy. I was not aware of this then, I only know that something was always pulling me toward it and I was emotionally tied to it. I know that my mother did not want to let us go, but since we lived close to the synagogue on Cara Urosa Street she let us, because we were not in danger from traffic back then. There were no cars and only two tramways went by our house every two hours. My mother did not let us out because we lived in a garden apartment. There were three of us, and when you let one you must let them all. We went to Kalemegdan and I have a lot of pictures with our mother or housekeeper. That is how children lived back then; later they let us ride scooters. Even though I was a girl I drove with my brothers. But there was no traffic. Children did not have the same freedom that they do today. When I was a young girl, my father was quite strict. He always waited for me in the summer and winter at 8 p.m. If I were five minutes late, he would point to the clock. Relationships were different, not to speak of discipline in schools and discipline in studies, in bedtimes and wake-up times. We were never permitted to wake up and stay in bed. That was a strange thing, but that is how we were raised. The moment Father came in, we had to stand up. It seems to me that it was a sign of respect – there was a relationship that is entirely different today.

I did not celebrate the holidays much, barely at all. *Shabbat* was a general holiday for us. I do not know how to explain it. *Shabbat* was not observed in our house, but it was felt in the whole neighborhood and probably that had an influence on my mother, since she certainly accepted something of the Jewish holidays, but not everything. The atmosphere was felt in the sense that life slowed down, the shops were closed, Father came home. But my father had to work on Saturday and even on Sundays. This is something that still bothers me today. I have the feeling that I lived between two religions. When I married my husband, he told me that on *Shabbat* his parents and sister closed the store and came home. His father smoked a lot and lit one after another, which I thought was very strange yet cute. In school I celebrated the Christian holidays. I remember Saint Sava, when I sang in the choir. There were also parties. I know that my father went to parties with my mother – not only in the Jewish center, which was located in the same place as it is today, but even more so to other places. She would sew a dress. My mother sewed at Regina Benvenisti's, which was a well-known salon in Belgrade, and would go to the officer's house for balls. They celebrated together. I did not have any connection to the community, and I do not remember which holidays they went to the community for.

Later, when we were older, we moved to Pasino Hill, where the atmosphere was entirely different. First of all, it was not as intimate. In general, the houses were privately owned and there were more Serbs than Jews. All of this influenced the formation of the psyche and the way of life and a different atmosphere. The Jewish families were different; we never heard that they hit their children. I do not remember that my mother or father hit us. Jews did not drink any alcohol. In our house no one drank, and this had its influence. Back then, there was a deeply felt respect not only of children for their parents, but between parents. I know that my father always talked endearingly to my mother. Her name was Miroslava, but he called her Mico. He always kissed her when he came home. Of course, he kissed us children, but he always kissed mother as well. Things were entirely different once we moved. We lived in a house where we lived with the landlord. We lived in the lower apartment, a larger apartment.

When our father was taken away and executed, we had to move from there. Then the troubles and relocation began. After a happy childhood, April 6, 1941, entirely ruined everything.

My father was unable to go to the seaside, but we went every summer to *Sarajevo* by train, from Sarajevo we took a short track train to *Herceg-Novi*, *Igalo*, *Kumbor*, the three of us children, Mother and, naturally, we brought our housekeeper along. My father could pay for all of this, but he was not able to leave his office to go on vacation with us. Now, when I think about this, it hurts me, because he invested a lot of energy and work into ensuring that his family was happy and satisfied, and unfortunately he was killed in his 40s. When we were adults, and when he would have been able to spend time with us, they killed him.

The last time I saw my father was November 14, 1941. After forced labor, he was imprisoned at Autokomand at Topovske Supe. Until November 13, actually November 14, my mother and I visited the camp. Every day, for more than a month, we brought him food and we waited for hours in line to give it to him. The Germans called out the names, and we had to say who we were looking for and who we were, and then they would call us. They called the prisoners to come to the yard, as the meetings were in the yard, and called those of us who were waiting in line to see our loved ones. The meetings were very hard, sad. I remember that I was very young and I still had not

grown to my parents' height. There was a great clamor. We were packed in like sardines. They turned on German music, which made the conversations more difficult. We were in the yard for 10 minutes. Of course, we entered when the whistle blew and left when it blew again. When that conversation was over, my mother departed on the left side of Topovske Supe and I on the right side, where the Number 10 tram runs today. My mother departed on the opposite side, cutting through gardens and meadows, so she would get home as soon as possible.

When I left the camp, which was surrounded by wires and many soldiers - to be more precise, armed guards - I tried to see my father one more time, not knowing it would be the last time. I got close to the fence and caught a glimpse of my father, his face and his hat at the window. I always have that picture of him with that hat in my mind. He waved to me and at that minute I heard a guard warning me not to get so close to the fence. Naturally, I was not scared and I did not react to his threat. Then he shot at my feet. I continued and a little further away I stopped again and I tried to speak with my father, but I do not remember about what. I remember that I waved and told him that Mother and I would come tomorrow. Then the guard shot again, this time at my head, and the bullet passed by my left ear. When my father saw this, he screamed and begged me to move away. I left, and this was the last time I saw him.

That day, November 13, was a nice sunny day, even though it was cold. However, during the night there was a storm. It snowed and rained, a strong wind blew and hit against the shutters and the gate. The entire night we listened to the rattle of the different locks and the murmurs that always accompany big storms. In the morning, my mother made lunch and, since it was slippery outside, she dressed me in boots and on top of them my father's old socks. She gave me two portions, which she wrapped in a lot of paper and rags so that the food would not get cold, and put it in a straw bag. I left. I registered and they took the list. They took the food from me, and 10 minutes later they returned the food to me. They told me that he had been taken to work in Germany; they did not even mention forced labor. That is actually how I learned that my father had been executed.

My brothers were with my mother. My brothers were younger than me. They moved out of the apartment and in general they hid around the neighborhood. Nedic's people captured my brothers a few times, but each time there was at least one of their friends from primary school present and they let them go. The neighbors announced that the Gestapo was coming. This was on Pasino Hill with only a few houses, where it was risky for the Gestapo to enter. This is how they avoided execution three times. My brothers did not go to school; only after the war did they finish school. Both are engineers. My eldest brother has a son, a daughter-in-law and three girls. My younger brother has a daughter, a son and two grandchildren. His daughter does not have children. Fate would have it that they also survived. My mother lived deep into old age and died at the age of 90. My father, my uncle Martin, and his wife and two children were all killed.

As soon as I turned 18 I married a Serb, and I had a son, Slobodan. During those years we all played, we went to school and still carried dolls. I had my child and I was more than happy. I have two grandchildren from my elder son. I moved six times. Because I married a Serb, I was protected in some ways, but not 100 percent. They captured me three times on the street: once on Karadordeva Street, once on Knez Mihailova and once at Slavija. I succeeded in getting away from them by using my youth and skill. I do not know why I seemed suspicious but most likely because

of my appearance. The whole situation in Belgrade was clear to everyone. They closed in on me on the corner of Knez Mihajlova and Kralja Petra. This was the first precinct; the police captured me and I did not have documents because I was young and I did not need to carry them. I lied to them and told them what was best for me. When they make a raid they arrest you and interrogate you. Once they captured me at the train station. I was there for only two or three hours and in the precinct much longer, five or six hours. I did not have a Jewish last name; I was already Vera Nedic. I told them my address and they could check it; I always managed to run away. They let me go. I had a small child and in general only went out with the child occasionally. Nedic's people captured me. I think it was not the German police. That is how I survived the war.

By 1945, I already was dating my second husband, Bata Amar. He asked me to marry him; I was already divorced. My ex-husband came to the community once to collect money for saving a Jew during the war. Sometimes things in life are fate. He ran into Aleksandar Aca Levi, who was a vice-president of the community; he knew my whole life story and told him never to come to the community again.

### After the war

When the war was over I met my husband Isak Bata Amar, the drama secretary, at the National Theatre when I enrolled in the Drama Studio. At the time it was called Drama Studio, before the Academy. After a two-hour conversation, he asked me if I would like to marry him. Yes. He said that the fact that I had a son did not bother him but that if his parents were still alive he would not be able to marry a half-Jew, since I had a Serbian mother and a Jewish father. He told me that he was from an Orthodox Jewish family and that he would not be able to marry me if his parents were still alive. Since he did not find any of his relatives when he returned from the war, we married on February 15, 1947. My husband never found anyone from his family. My husband was a lawyer but worked in the field of culture. I also worked in the cultural field: for the cultural committee, then in "Nolit" and then in television and newspaper.

I have a son from this marriage, who also works in the field of culture as a film director, and a granddaughter Sara, who studies in Israel. My life is entirely different. After four years of suffering, I was at 29 Strahinica Bana, the house of Avram Mevorah, a Jewish lawyer, when liberation finally came. When I met my husband I complained that I did not have money to pay for the year. He took the receipt and went to Avram Mevorah and told him that I was his future wife. He ripped up the receipt and I never paid the rent.

It was a nice life with Isak Amar. My son from my first marriage received the same treatment, if not better, than our other son. My son Slobodan received that name because he waited for freedom and Zoran because he was born at dawn. I lived a lovely and happy life. Isak, like my father, brought tranquility to our house. There was lots of love and understanding. He had something that charmed people – not only those in the family but all those around him. He was a functionary in the community and held several positions. One thing that I remember is the space below the synagogue, which is currently being renovated into a kosher kitchen. Mr. Reuben Rubenovic, who was president of the Jewish community of Belgrade at the time, handed me the key, and said: "Here is the key for two days; take whatever you need, however much you want." I had a wonderful blue coat, a blue dress. I took shoes; before that I wore shoes without soles and had to fill them in with cardboard. When I went to work on the "Brcko Banovici" railway tracks for two

months, in 1946, my husband sent me American canned food and a wonderful package that the Jews received. I will never forget the peanut butter and chocolate with raisins.

With Bata, I participated in the community. We sang in the Jewish choir, and twice I went with the choir to Israel. When I went to Israel now, after all these years, I did not recognize the place. In 1955, I went to Haifa for the first time by boat; we traveled three days via Greece. Jews we knew from Belgrade waited for us in Haifa.

Because of the life I spent with Bata Amar, I participated in all cultural events, parties and holidays in our community. My husband did not want to speak about his origins. He lived with his family before the war at 48 Dusanova Street. After the war, the owner of the building called us to give us photographs; everything else was taken. We also got back one brooch and pearls. The owner was able to save only the pictures; the Germans threw away the rest. The ring I wear was made from the brooch. My sons' wives each received a ring with one of three stones from the brooch. That is all my husband was able to find. My brothers continued to live in Belgrade. One is connected to the community; the other is not. We are divided.

Now I am a full Jew; I became *giur* – as my mother wasn't a Jew – in Israel. I wanted that. I was psychologically ready but not physically. I did not even get information about what to bring with me for that moment. I came to grips with this, that minute but instincts are very important. I brought with me everything that was needed. It was my luck that I was not alone. My granddaughter Sara was with me and helped me. I remember that when I entered the room in Ashkelon, which was filled with books, three rabbis sat there, the date was December 17. I do not know *Ivrit* but I know German, which is similar to Yiddish. So I arranged with one of the priests that my granddaughter and our rabbi, Isak Asiel, be present. When I went in, we greeted each other and they even asked Sara if she wanted to convert. Sara answered that she was not ready. The honesty of her answer impressed the rabbis, Isak and me. She was only 19 at the time, now things are different.

Three questions remain in my head. Why do I want to be a Jew? I answered that I always was a Jew. The second question was: Will I observe *Shabbat*? I answered yes. The third question was: Am I prepared to help people to the best of my ability? I said that I could not answer that, but that Isak could tell them. They were especially surprised when they asked me what Hebrew name I wanted and I immediately answered “Judita.” I wanted to have the same name as my grandmother. I knew so little about her and I never had the chance to feel her love – so I wanted to have her name. It is a very great thing to be a grandmother. I now have three grandchildren and I see how much they depend on my love and understanding.

When I say that I am a real Jew, I am. I became an Orthodox Jew. I keep kosher, I observe *Shabbat* and all the holidays and still learn a lot. I am happy about this, and I have peace of mind. I have balance. I go to synagogue on Friday night and Saturday and this is enough for me. I feel psychologically healthy and good.